The Romantic Period, 1820-1860: Essayists and Poets

The Romantic movement, which originated in Germany but quickly spread to England, France, and beyond, reached America around the year 1820, some 20 years after William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge had revolutionized English poetry by publishing **Lyrical Ballads**. In America as in Europe, fresh new vision electrified artistic and intellectual circles. Yet there was an important difference: Romanticism in America coincided with the period of national expansion and the discovery of a distinctive American voice. The solidification of a national identity and the surging idealism and passion of Romanticism nurtured the masterpieces of the American Renaissance.

Romantic ideas centered around art as inspiration, the spiritual and aesthetic dimension of nature, and metaphors of organic growth. Art, rather than science, Romantics argued, could best express universal truth. The Romantics underscored the importance of expressive art for the individual and society. In his essay "The Poet" (1844), Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps the most influential writer of the Romantic era, asserts:

For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.
The development of the self became a major theme; self-awareness a primary method. If, according to Romantic theory, self and nature were one, self-awareness was not a selfish dead end but a mode of knowledge opening up the universe. If one's self were one with all humanity, then the individual had a moral duty to reform social inequalities and relieve human suffering. The idea of "self" -- which suggested selfishness to earlier generations -- was redefined. New compound words with positive meanings emerged: "self-realization," "self-expression," "self-reliance."

As the unique, subjective self became important, so did the realm of psychology. Exceptional artistic effects and techniques were developed to evoke heightened psychological states. The "sublime" -- an effect of beauty in grandeur (for example, a view from a mountaintop) -- produced feelings of awe, reverence, vastness, and a power beyond human comprehension.

Romanticism was affirmative and appropriate for most American poets and creative essayists. America's vast mountains, deserts, and tropics embodied the sublime. The Romantic spirit seemed particularly suited to American democracy: It stressed individualism, affirmed the value of the common person, and looked to the inspired imagination for its aesthetic and ethical values. Certainly the New England Transcendentalists -- Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and their associates -- were inspired to a new optimistic affirmation by the Romantic movement. In New England, Romanticism fell upon fertile soil.

**TRANSCENDENTALISM**

The Transcendentalist movement was a reaction against 18th century rationalism and a manifestation of the general humanitarian trend of 19th century thought. The movement was based on a fundamental belief in the unity of the world and God. The soul of each individual was thought to be identical with the world -- a microcosm of the world itself. The doctrine of self-reliance and individualism developed through the belief in the identification of the individual soul with God.

Transcendentalism was intimately connected with Concord, a small New England village 32 kilometers west of Boston. Concord was the first inland settlement of the original Massachusetts Bay Colony. Surrounded by forest, it was and remains a peaceful town close enough to Boston's lectures, bookstores, and colleges to be intensely cultivated, but far enough away to be serene. Concord was the first battle of the American Revolution, and Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem commemorating the battle, "Concord Hymn," has one of the most famous o
stanzas in American literature:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.

Concord was the first rural artist's colony, and the first place to offer a spirit of cultural alternative to American materialism. It was a place of high-minded simplicity and simple living (Emerson and Henry David Thoreau both had vegetable gardens). Emerson, who moved to Concord in 1834, and Thoreau are most closely associated with the town, but the locale also attracted the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, the essayist Margaret Fuller, the educator (and father of novelist Louisa May Alcott) Bronson Alcott, and the poet William Ellery Channing. The Transcendental Club was organized in 1836 and included, at various times, Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson (a leading minister), Theodore Parker (a Unitarian minister), and others.

The Transcendentalists published a quarterly magazine, *The Dial*, which last twenty years and was first edited by Margaret Fuller and later by Emerson. Reform and some were involved in experimental utopian communities such as the Brook Farm (described in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*) and Fruitlands.

Unlike many European groups, the Transcendentalists never issued a manifesto or a detailed, systematic program. The Transcendental Romantics pushed radical individualism to the extreme. American heroes often saw themselves as lonely explorers outside society and convention. The Transcendental Romantics were metaphysical self-discovery. For the Romantic American writer, nature was given. Literary and social conventions, far from being helpful, were dangerous. There was tremendous pressure to discover an authentic literary form, content, and expression at the same time. It is clear from the many masterpieces produced in the thirty years before the U.S. Civil War (1861-65) that American writers rose to the challenge.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)**

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the towering figure of his era, had a religious sense of mission. Although many accused him of subverting Christianity, he explained that, for him, a good minister was necessary to leave the church. "The address he delivered at his alma mater, the Harvard Divinity School, made him unwelcome at Harvard for years. In it, Emerson accused the church of acting "as if God were dead" and of emphasizing dogma while stifling the spirit.

Emerson's philosophy has been called contradictory, and it is true that he avoided building a logical intellectual system because such a system negated his Romantic belief in intuition and flexibility. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson remarks: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Yet, he was remarkably consistent in his call for the birth of American individualism in its simplest natural form. Most of his major ideas -- the need for a new rational vision, the use of experience, the notion of the cosmic Over-Soul, and the doctrine of compulsion -- are suggested in his first publication, *Nature* (1836). This essay opens:

> Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It will not build of itself. It has not the energy, nor the faith. It is satisfied with its old pcce.
nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also e an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not history of theirs. Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of I stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supp action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bc the past...? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand c own works and laws and worship.

Emerson loved the aphoristic genius of the 16th-century French essayist Mo he once told Bronson Alcott that he wanted to write a book like Montaigne's, poetry, business, divinity, philosophy, anecdotes, smut." He complained tha abstract style omitted "the light that shines on a man's hat, in a child's spoc

Spiritual vision and practical, aphoristic expression make Emerson exhilarati the Concord Transcendentalists aptly compared listening to him with "going a swing." Much of his spiritual insight comes from his readings in Eastern re especially Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islamic Sufism. For example, his po "Brahma" relies on Hindu sources to assert a cosmic order beyond the limite of mortals:

If the red slayer think he slay
Or the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near,
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt;
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven,
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

This poem, published in the first number of the Atlantic Monthly magazine (: confused readers unfamiliar with Brahma, the highest Hindu god, the eterna soul of the universe. Emerson had this advice for his readers: "Tell them to instead of Brahma:"

The British critic Matthew Arnold said the most important writings in English century had been Wordsworth's poems and Emerson's essays. A great prose Emerson influenced a long line of American poets, including Walt Whitman, Dickinson, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, and Rob is also credited with influencing the philosophies of John Dewey, George Sar Friedrich Nietzsche, and William James.